



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ROMAN CURIA
AT THE TRADITIONAL EXCHANGE OF CHRISTMAS GREETINGS**

Clementine Hall

Friday, 21 December 2007

Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Presbyterate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At this meeting we are already breathing the joy of Christmas, now at hand. I am deeply grateful for your participation in this traditional event, whose special spiritual atmosphere has been vividly evoked by the Cardinal Dean, Angelo Sodano, who recalled the main theme of my recent [Encyclical Letter on Christian hope](#). I warmly thank him for his cordial words expressing the good wishes of the College of Cardinals, of the Members of the Roman Curia and of the Governorate, as well as of the Papal Representatives scattered throughout the world. Our community, as you emphasized, Your Eminence, is truly a "working community", bound by bonds of fraternal love which the Christmas festivities help to reinforce. In this spirit, you did not omit an appropriate mention of the former members of our Curial family who crossed the threshold of time in recent months and have entered into God's peace. On such an occasion it does our hearts good to feel close to those who shared the service to the Church with us and who now intercede for us at God's throne. I therefore thank you for your words, Your Eminence, Dean of the College of Cardinals, and I thank everyone present for the contribution that each one makes to the fulfilment of the ministry entrusted to me by the Lord.

Another year is drawing to a close. I would like to mention my [Visit to Brazil](#) as the first salient event of this period which has passed so quickly. Its purpose was the Meeting with the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences and consequently, more generally, a Meeting with the Church in the vast Continent of Latin America. Before reflecting on the Conference at Aparecida, I would like to mention several highlights of this

Journey. First of all, the solemn evening with the young people at the stadium in São Paulo: on that evening, despite the severe temperatures, we found ourselves all united by a great inner joy, a living experience of communion and the clear desire to be servants of reconciliation in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, friends of the poor and suffering and messengers of that goodness whose splendour we encountered in the Gospel. Mass events are organized whose sole effect is self-affirmation; people let themselves be swept away in them by the inebriating rhythm and sounds and end by finding enjoyment in themselves alone. There, on the contrary, it was their very souls that were opened; deep communion was spontaneously felt among us on that evening: being *with* one another brought with it being *for* one another. It was not an escape from daily life but was transformed into the strength to accept life in a new way. Thus, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to the young people who enlivened that evening for their *being-with*, their singing, their words and their prayers, which inwardly purified and improved us - and also improved us for others.

The day on which, together with a large number of Bishops, priests, Religious and lay faithful, I canonized Frei Galvão, a son of Brazil, proclaiming him a Saint of the universal Church, lives on, unforgettable. We were greeted everywhere with reproductions of his image which shone with the bright goodness of heart he had found in his encounter with Christ and in his relationship with his religious community. We have been told with regard to Christ's definitive return in the *parousia* that he will not come alone but with all his saints. Thus, every saint who enters history already constitutes a tiny portion of Christ's second Coming, his new entry into time which shows us his image in a new dimension and assures us of his presence. Jesus Christ does not belong to the past, nor is he confined to a distant future whose coming we do not even have the courage to seek. He arrives with a great procession of saints. Together with his saints he is already on his way towards us, towards our present.

I remember most vividly the day I spent at the Fazenda da Esperança, where people enslaved by drugs rediscover freedom and hope. On my arrival there, the first thing that happened was that I perceived the healing power of God's creation in a new way. Green mountains encircle the broad valley; they direct the gaze upwards and at the same time give a sense of protection. From the tabernacle of the little church of the Carmelites flows a stream of clear water which calls to mind Ezekiel's prophecy about the water flowing from the Temple which disintoxicates the salty earth, making possible the growth of trees that bring life. We must defend creation not only with a view to its usefulness for us but for its own sake - as a message from the Creator, a gift of beauty which is a promise and hope. Yes, man needs transcendence. God alone suffices, Teresa of Avila said. If God is absent, man must seek by himself to go beyond the world's boundaries, to open before him the boundless space for which he was created. Drugs then become, as it were, a need for him. Yet he very soon discovers that they are an unending illusion - one might say, a trick the devil plays on man. There, at the Fazenda da Esperança, the world's boundaries are truly transcended, the gaze is opened to God, to the fullness of our life, and so healing is brought about. I address my sincere gratitude to all those who work there and my cordial good wishes and Blessings to all

who seek healing there.

I would then like to recall the meeting with the Brazilian Bishops in the Cathedral of São Paulo. The solemn music that accompanied us lives on, unforgettable. What made it particularly beautiful was the fact that it was performed by a choir and orchestra composed of poor youth from that city. Those people thus offered us the experience of beauty, one of those gifts through which it is possible to go beyond the limitations of the everyday nature of the world and perceive loftier realities that assure us of God's beauty. Then the experience of "effective and affective collegiality", of fraternal communion in our common ministry, made us feel the joy of catholicity. Beyond all the geographical and cultural boundaries we are brothers and sisters, together with the Risen Christ who has called us to his service.

And, finally, Aparecida. I found the little image of Our Lady quite specially moving. Some poor fishermen who had repeatedly cast their nets in vain drew the little statue from the waters of the river and then, at last, had an abundant catch. She is Our Lady of the poor who herself became poor and lowly. Hence, precisely through faith and love of the poor, the great Shrine came into being around this figure and, still reflecting the poverty of God and the humility of the Mother, day after day constitutes a home and refuge for people who pray and hope. It was good for us to gather there and it was there that we drafted the document on the theme "*Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that in him they may have life*". Of course, someone might immediately ask: but was this the right subject at this time in history in which we are living? Was it not too abrupt a turn toward interiority at a moment when the great challenges of history, the urgent questions about justice, peace and freedom, require the full commitment of all people of good will and in particular of Christianity and the Church? Should we not have tackled these problems rather than withdrawing into the inner world of faith?

For the time being, let us leave aside these objections. In fact, before responding to them it is necessary to have a proper grasp of the true meaning of the theme itself; once it has been understood, the response to the objection becomes clear. The key word of the theme is: to find life, true life. In this regard the theme implies that this objective, on which perhaps everyone agrees, is achieved in discipleship to Jesus Christ as well as in commitment to his Word and Presence. Thus, Christians in Latin America, and with them those of the whole world, are first of all invited once again to become better "disciples of Jesus Christ" - something that basically we already are by virtue of Baptism, which does not mean that we must not ceaselessly become so over and over again by actively appropriating the gift of that Sacrament. Being disciples of Christ - what does this mean? Well, in the first place it means being able to recognize him. How does this happen? It is an invitation to listen to him just as he speaks to us in the text of Sacred Scripture, as he addresses us and comes to meet us in the common prayer of the Church, in the sacraments and in the witness of the saints. One can never know Christ only theoretically. With great teaching one can know everything about the Sacred Scriptures without ever having met him. Journeying with him is an integral part of knowing him, of entering his sentiments, as the Letter to the

Philippians (2: 5) says. Paul briefly describes these sentiments: having the same love, being of the same mind (*sýmpsychoi*), being in full accord, doing nothing out of rivalry and boastfulness, each one not only focusing on his or her own interests but also on those of others (2: 2-4). Catechesis can never be merely the instruction of the mind; it must always also become a practice of communion of life with Christ, an exercise in humility, justice and love. Only in this way do we walk with Jesus Christ on his path, only in this way are the eyes of our hearts opened; only in this way do we learn to understand Scripture and to meet him. The encounter with Jesus Christ requires listening, requires a response in prayer and in putting into practice what he tells us. By getting to know Christ we come to know God, and it is only by starting from God that we understand man and the world, a world that would otherwise remain a nonsensical question.

Becoming disciples of Christ is thus an educational journey towards our true being, towards the proper way of being human. In the Old Testament, the basic attitude of the one who lives God's Word is summed up in the term *zadic* - righteous: a person who lives according to God's Word becomes righteous; he practices and lives justice. In Christianity, moreover, the attitude of Jesus Christ's disciples is expressed with another word: faithful. Faith encompasses everything; this word now means both being with Christ and being with his justice. In faith, we receive Christ's justice, we live it ourselves and pass it on. The Aparecida document makes all this concrete by speaking of the good news about human dignity, life, the family, science and technology, on human labour, the universal destination of the earth's goods and ecology. These are dimensions in which justice is expressed, faith is lived and responses are made to the challenges of our time.

A disciple of Jesus Christ, the document tells us, must also be a "missionary", a Gospel messenger. It is here, furthermore, that the objection arises: is it still legitimate today to "evangelize"? Should not all the world's religions and conceptions rather coexist peacefully and seek together to do their best for humanity, each in its own way? Well, that we must all coexist and cooperate in tolerance and reciprocal respect goes without question. The Catholic Church is actively committed to this and, with the two meetings in [Assisi](#), has left evident signs of it, signs that we renewed again at this year's Meeting in [Naples](#). On this topic, I would like to mention the kind letter sent to me last 13 October by 138 Muslim religious leaders, testifying to their common commitment to promoting world peace. I responded joyfully, expressing my convinced adherence to such noble intentions, and at the same time emphasized the urgent need for a binding accord to safeguard the values of reciprocal respect, dialogue and collaboration. Shared recognition of the existence of one God, the provident Creator and universal Judge of everyone's conduct, constitutes the premise of a common action in defence of the effective respect of the dignity of every human person in order to build a more just and united society.

But might not this desire for dialogue and collaboration also mean at the same time that we can no longer transmit Jesus Christ's message, no longer propose to humanity and to the world this call and the hope that derives from it? Those who have recognized a great truth or discovered a great joy have to pass it on; they absolutely cannot keep it to themselves. These great gifts are never

intended for only one person. In Jesus Christ a great light emerged for us, *the* great Light: we cannot put it under a bushel basket, we must set it on a lampstand so that it will give light to all who are in the house (cf. Mt 5: 15). St Paul travelled tirelessly, taking the Gospel with him. He even felt under a sort of "compulsion" to proclaim the Gospel (cf. I Cor 9: 16) - not so much out of concern for the salvation of the single non-baptized person who had not yet been reached by the Gospel, but rather because he was aware that history as a whole could not attain fulfilment until the Gospel had reached the full number (*pléroma*) of Gentiles (cf. Rom 11: 25). To reach its completion, history needs the proclamation of the Good News to all peoples, to all men and women (cf. Mk 13: 10). Actually, how important it is that forces of reconciliation, forces of peace, forces of love and of justice flow into one another in humanity! How important it is that in the "budget" of humanity, opposition be aroused and invigorated to challenge the threatening sentiments and the realities of violence and injustice! This is exactly what happens in the Christian mission. Through the encounter with Jesus Christ and his saints, through the encounter with God, humanity's "reserves" are replenished with those forces of good without which all our programmes of social order do not become reality but - in the onslaught of the extremely powerful pressure of other interests contrary to peace and justice - remain no more than abstract theories.

Thus, we have returned to the questions asked at the beginning: was Aparecida right to give priority to the discipleship of Jesus Christ and to evangelization in the quest for the life of the world? Might it have been an erroneous withdrawal into interiority? No! Aparecida decided correctly because it is precisely through the new encounter with Jesus Christ and his Gospel - and only in this way - that forces are inspired which enable us to give the right response to the challenges of the time.

At the end of June I sent a [Letter to the Bishops, priests, consecrated people and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China](#). With this Letter, I desired to express both my deep spiritual affection for all Catholics in China and cordial respect for the Chinese People. I recalled in it the perennial principles of Catholic tradition and the [Second Vatican Council](#) in an ecclesiological context. In the light of Christ's "original plan" for his Church, I indicated certain approaches in order to face and resolve, in a spirit of communion and truth, the delicate and complex problems of the Church's life in China. I also pointed out the Holy See's readiness for a serene and constructive dialogue with the civil Authorities in order to find a solution to the various problems that concern the Catholic community. The Letter was received by Catholics in China with joy and gratitude. I express the wish that with God's help it may produce the hoped-for fruit.

Unfortunately, I can only mention briefly the other salient moments of the year. Indeed, these events, such as the marvellous [Visit to Austria](#), had the same aims and were intended to highlight the same approaches. *L'Osservatore Romano* carried a beautiful description of the rain that accompanied us: "the rain of faith"; not only were the downpours far from diminishing the joy of our faith in Christ, experienced in looking at his Mother, but on the contrary they strengthened it. This joy penetrated the curtain of clouds that hung above us. In looking to Christ with Mary, we found

the Light which showed us the way through all the darkness of the world. I would like to thank warmly the Austrian Bishops, priests, women religious, men religious and the many faithful who walked beside me on the journey to Christ in those days for this encouraging sign of faith which they gave us.

The [meeting with the young people in the Agora at Loreto](#) was also an important sign of joy and hope: if so many young people want to encounter Mary, and with Mary, Christ, if they let themselves be influenced by the joy of faith, then we can move ahead calmly to meet the future. I spoke of this to youth on various occasions: during my [Visit to the Casal del Marmo Juvenile Penitentiary](#) and in my [Discourses at the Audiences](#) or [Sunday Angeluses](#). In relaunching the issue of education and calling for the commitment of the local Churches in the pastoral care of vocations, I noted the young peoples' expectations and generous intentions. I did not, of course, fail to denounce the forms of manipulation to which young people today are exposed or the dangers that derive from them for the society of the future.

I have already very briefly mentioned the [Naples Meeting](#). There too, it was raining - a most unusual occurrence for this city of sunshine and light - but there too the human warmth and living faith penetrated the clouds, allowing us to experience the joy that comes from the Gospel.

One must not of course deceive oneself. Major problems are posed by the secularism of our time and by the pressure of ideological presumptions, to which the secularist conscience, with its exclusive claim to definitive rationality, inclines. We are aware of this and know the effort of the struggle imposed upon us in our time. However, we also know that the Lord keeps his promise: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 20). In this happy certainty, accepting the incentive of the reflections at Aparecida for us also to renew our being with Christ, let us advance confidently to meet the new year. Let us travel on under the motherly gaze of the *Aparecida*, she who described herself as "the handmaid of the Lord". May her protection keep us safe and fill us with hope. With these sentiments I cordially impart the Apostolic Blessing to you who are present here and to all of you who belong to the large family of the Roman Curia.